

## **Session 4**

### **Compassion with the Heart of Christ**



The vision challenges us to service through outreach ministries - face to face, hand to hand, with the poor, the least, the outcast and the hungry

#### **Prayer for the week**

Each day you are invited to use this prayer to begin your study. As you read, study and pray, let the challenge of the vision work its way into your heart, your habits and your hopes for the future.

#### **The Heart of the Matter**

Our hearts are tender instruments easily bruised and broken by those we entrust them to, damaged by diet and lifestyle. Lucky, the ones who grow to adulthood with hearts barely dented, needing only minor repairs. Others, we know too well, drag along hearts rusty and broken by cigarettes and sweethearts, aching from alcohol and alimony yet somehow keep risking them open begging for compassion.

Something in that pulsing purple heart demands company, community, beats to be made new, seeks a cure to make life whole. Sacred the hearts given into our care. May we handle them as gently and surely as Jesus.

#### **Session author – Cynthia Stateman**

Cynthia is the pastor at Community United Methodist Church in Quincy, California. "Compassion is one of the hallmarks of living out our Christian faith. My essays are founded on the proposition that God entered the world as Jesus Christ with the purpose of softening, opening and healing our hearts so that we might be freed from the cultural patterns and expectations which reinforce the notion that human worthiness is relative and conditional rather than absolute and universal. Compassion with the heart of Jesus is the quality of relationship that recognizes and responds to the brokenness and wounded-ness of our lives, and does so in a way that reveals and honors the sacredness of every life."

**Session 4:  
Compassion with the Heart of Christ**

**Day One – Conditions of the Heart**

**Read Matthew 5:6 (NRSV)**

**Luke 17:20-21 (New Century)**

**John 4:10-11 (NRSV)**

**John 7:37-38 (NRSV)**

The heart is spoken of in Scripture as something more than a muscle that tirelessly pumps blood through the body. In the Bible, the heart is also understood to be the center – the spiritual center – of a person, social unit or institution. Not only do individuals have hearts, but so do families, businesses, schools, churches, communities, governments and all the other components of human society. The heart is that inner place where character, identity, and what we believe, see, feel, think and do are shaped. All the experience and circumstances of life are channeled into the heart, deciphered there, and then projected back into the world in the form of our beliefs, attitudes and perceptions; the choices we make, the ways in which we behave, and how we relate to others.

The primary function of the heart, however, is to circulate the grace of God into and throughout every life, social unit and institution. Grace is the activity and experience of God's unconditional love. Grace flows into the heart and enables us to decipher events and circumstances of life in healthy ways; and from the heart, God's grace is projected into the world in the form of compassionate beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, choices, behavior and relationships. Scripture warns us though, that hardened, constricted or damaged hearts restrict the flow of God's grace. What happens then is we project a twisted version

of reality into the world that depicts love, forgiveness and human worthiness as conditions of relationship which must be won, bought, earned or deserved. This is why so many of our relationships and so much of human culture rests on systems of values, assumptions and beliefs that limit our capacity for compassionate living.



Compassion is one of the hallmarks of living out our Christian faith. Dictionaries typically define compassion as a deep empathy with the suffering of another, coupled with the desire to help. Jesus Christ, however, expands that definition of compassion beyond empathy and desire, and far beyond the activity of doing good deeds or being nice. Compassion with the heart of Jesus is the quality of relationship that recognizes and responds to the brokenness and woundedness of our lives, and does so in a way that reveals and honors the sacredness



## **Day Two – The Broken Heart**

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* – Matthew 5:4 (NRSV)

Mourning is far more than just the feeling of sadness. Chemical disturbances in the body can make us feel sad. A romantic movie can make us feel sad. Mourning is the process by which we experience and examine the pain of a broken heart and make room for healing to begin. We mourn when a loved one dies, our children leave home for the final time, our parent's memory of our life together begins to fade, or friendships end. We mourn in response to any painful departure, change or breach in a relationship we value. In mourning, we revisit every aspect of the other person's role in our lives, and review in meticulous detail the influence we have had on theirs. We remember all of the joy and gladness, mistakes and failures that marked the relationship. What makes us mourn and breaks our hearts extends beyond the experience of loss to the realization that something of the potential for goodness in life we shared with the other has been wasted, neglected or gone astray. What comforts and strengthens us is the knowledge that neither death nor any other ending has the last word; and by God's grace and forgiveness, we are empowered to break free from continuing and repeating our past failures and mistakes.

Jesus tells us those who mourn are blessed—headed in the right direction, on the straight path—the path that leads to our discovery of the kingdom of heaven. The word Jesus uses for mourning is the strongest in the Greek language. It implies weeping and wailing; an expression of grief both deep and wide, felt inside and seen outside. This is not the language of mild or transient regret, but of deep contrition which recognizes just how great the gap is

between how things are, and how things ought to be. It is the recognition that much of the potential for goodness, not only in our private lives, but in all the world has indeed been wasted, neglected and gone astray. The mourning that Jesus calls blessed is for anything and everything that breaks our hearts with the reality of God's wounded creation. It touches us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is the deep felt sorrow for a broken world that echoes the pain in God's own broken heart.

Our culture tends to regard open grief as undignified and even weak. We admire those who quietly go about their rituals of mourning with a stiff upper lip. We encourage one another to move through the stages of grief to a preferably swift closure. However, we need to mourn, and mourn deeply, for the spoiling of creation. We need to feel and examine the pain imbedded within the deep cracks in human society.

"Jesus wept," is the shortest verse in the Bible, but it has a long reach. On a freezing night a homeless woman dies alone in an abandoned building. A dispute between young men erupts into a hail of bullets. Children fall victim to neglect and abuse. Men and women lose their sense of dignity as they vainly search for work. Millions are doomed to die from AIDS, hunger, and warfare. The richest country in the world, which makes up only 6% of the world's population, controls 60% of the world's resources. Creation is out of whack. Human life is broken. Things are not the way they are supposed to be. Mourning is a very important part of the spiritual process that cultivates compassion. We need to

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experience the pain of broken heartedness that accompanies the process of mourning for ourselves, with our neighbors, and in solidarity with all creation. That kind of pain hollows us out so God can fill us with grace.

God's comfort comes to those who will let their hearts be broken and torn by life; whose calluses are not so deep they cannot grieve. Living as we do in such a comfort-orientated society, it is important to understand the quality of comfort Jesus promises to those who mourn. Because of the way the word is normally used, we typically equate comfort with soothing our feelings. However, the root meaning of comfort is "to give strength," and that is what Jesus promises, the strength of God's

grace. The comfort God wants to bring to those who mourn is not about pushing away reality, but exposing it for what it really is. Furthermore, it is not primarily about soothing how we feel, but about giving us the strength to face the reality of our personal complicity in the world's suffering, the grace of forgiveness, and the power to change. God's grace strengthens us as we examine all our individual and collective roles and influences on the current state of affairs, and permits the sorrow of our broken hearts to spill out of our lives, and from there into outward, tangible, compassionate action.

God does not comfort us to make us comfortable," someone said, "but to make us comforters." God uses our painful experiences not only to heal us, but to heal others through us. The people who best understand distress are those who have been distressed. The people who know how to walk with people in pain, are those who have been rattled by it themselves. The ones who realize how best to sit with grieving people, are those who have grieved. The ones who are forgiven, and are empowered to break free from continuing and repeating past failures and mistakes, are those who have mourned.

**Pause to Reflect**

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### **Day Three – The Perceptive Heart**

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. – Matthew 5:3 (NRSV)*

**Read John 9:1-3 (NRSV)**  
**Luke 18:9-14 9 (NRSV)**

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...” Jesus begins this blessing with a stunning reversal of everything we typically conceive of as blessedness. We generally think of a blessing as a special benefit a person enjoys: “She is blessed with athletic skill,” and “He is blessed with good health,” or “I am blessed with an excellent pension plan.” We consider ourselves blessed when we have a good family life, satisfying employment, friends who remember our birthdays, or the newborn baby finally begins to sleep through the night. When we say we are blessed, we are usually talking about good things we have and enjoy, even if they are intangible rather than material.

There’s a problem here though. The problem is when we take such matters as signs of God’s blessing there is also the tendency, often subconscious, to presume those who do not enjoy these “blessings” are somehow less favored by God. This presumption is also frequently expressed in faith statements such as, “there but for the grace of God go I,” which relate to misfortunes that afflict others, but have happened to pass us by. In this respect, we are not unlike the original disciples of Jesus who asked whether the man born blind had himself sinned or his parents. This question assumes the external conditions and circumstances of a life are accurate indicators of the person’s worthiness and blessedness. We have a tendency to also presume most people have both worked for and earned any advantages, comforts, privileges or status they have or lack, or what they have or lack is uniquely deserved because of some virtue

or vice. This is a tendency we share with the Pharisee who compared himself to the tax collector.

Our western culture is particularly steadfast in reinforcing the notions that we are supposed to be independent and self-sufficient, and some people are more deserving of our compassion than others. We are supposed to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, work out our own problems, recognize that no one has an excuse for being poor and that any one who works hard enough will get ahead. “God helps those who help themselves” is practically the American national motto. These attitudes and perceptions are so imbedded within our cultural identity we have a tendency to live them out, even when we think we disagree with them. For example, the unwed welfare mother who stocks up on groceries from the church’s food pantry toward the end of each month is likely to be criticized for “taking advantage of the system.” We feel more compassionate towards the executive laid off from her job and unemployed for a year, than for the high school drop-out who has never had a job. We will cheerfully organize a church fundraiser for help with the medical bill for the kid with leukemia, but debate long and hard about doing the same for the ex-smoker with emphysema. We all have our arguments why compassion is impractical under the circumstance; how the other person has to be compassionate first; how the other person does not really want, need or deserve our compassion; or, worst yet, how we are already being compassionate enough. These presumptions, and others

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like them, are reflections of cultural patterns and expectations which reinforce the notion that human worthiness is relative and conditional rather than absolute and universal. This is because social relations in our culture are typically ordered into competitive and hierarchal configurations. Almost all our relationships and social structures are organized and maintained in accordance with a system of core values that measure out human worthiness and eligibility for compassion in increments that correspond to conditions of relationship which must be won, bought, earned or deserved. Our cultural assumptions and

expectations about what constitutes the good life, and criteria we use to assess our moral obligations tend to reflect those values.

However, the Bible offers a somewhat different perspective—what most of us take for granted as inevitable patterns of social organization are, in fact, symptoms of a fallen creation. The more deeply we embrace these culturally constructed assumptions and values, the more difficult it is to perceive God’s reign in our midst. There is a wonderfully simple story that illustrates this biblical perspective:

“What is the difference between heaven and hell?” asked the student.

“In hell”, said the teacher, “all the people are gathered around a big table that God has filled with food. They can smell the food and touch the food and hold the food, but they cannot bring the food to their mouths because their arms are stiff and their elbows are locked.”

“Yes, that is hell,” said the student. “And what is heaven like?”

“In heaven”, said the teacher, “all the people are gathered around a big table that God has filled with food. They can smell the food and touch the food and hold the food, but they cannot bring the food to their mouths because their arms are stiff and their elbows are locked.”

The confused student asked, “So what’s the difference between heaven and hell?”

“In heaven,” the teacher answered, “the people are feeding each other.”

(Author Unknown)

God entered into our world as Jesus Christ to help us cultivate perceptive hearts that recognize how certain cultural assumptions, expectations and values impoverish, marginalize and disenfranchise us all. In Christ’s preaching, teaching, healing, and relations with others, he demonstrated and advocated the ruling values, assumptions and beliefs of God’s reign. Jesus overturned the most rigidly upheld cultural assumptions and expectations of his time. He rejected the dogma that high-ranking men are the favorites of God. He touched the untouchables. He healed and fed people without discrimination. He took children seriously, and related to women and all others as equal to himself.

He taught that God’s mandate for all relationships is to honor the intrinsic human worthiness of each and exercise compassion towards all. God’s grace is universal. It is poured out upon and available to all persons, and permeates all human life with the potential for beauty, goodness, wholeness and love. Perceptive hearts fuel the desire in us



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Consider also the church groups and others who volunteer at the soup kitchen to “feed” the hungry, conduct worship services at the nursing home, or engage in other good works – the ones who mean well, but leave as soon as they can get away, having avoided physical contact with the beneficiaries as much as possible, listened to them with only half of an ear, and offered them only perfunctory greetings and responses. We ignore, avoid or otherwise fail to pay attention and take seriously our neighbors’ humanity in these and a variety of other ways that starve their hearts and put calluses on ours.

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man invites us to sit closer to the Lazarus people in our midst and pay attention to and honor to the fullness of their humanity, and not just the single dimension of “otherness” we

have determined to be the factors that mark them as unlike ourselves. It does not matter whether we perceive their “otherness” as positive or negative; Lazarus people are those neighbors whom we have relegated to the status of perpetual strangers. They are those persons whom, for various reasons, we consider to be unlike ourselves to the extent we either do not recognize them, or do not trust them. We do not engender them with hopes, needs, feelings or desires consistent with our own.

It is all well and good to say we should cultivate attentive hearts, but what happens when we alter our relationships with those whom we presume to be sufficiently unlike ourselves to challenge our sense of security and well being? Here is a one person’s account of an unlikely friendship that may shed some light on the possibilities.

*I worked in San Francisco’s financial district, and was in the habit of eating lunch in the lovely little courtyard at the back of St. Mary’s Church. No more than a dozen people were ever present, and most of the others were, like me, lunchtime regulars. It was the perfect spot for a quiet lunch; the next best thing to a private refuge – no noise, no panhandlers, no traffic, no hurry– nothing but peace and quiet. That is...until the day the crazy guy showed up.*

*Now, there are more nuts walking around loose on the streets of San Francisco than you’d find at the bottom of a 10 ton box of Cracker Jacks ®. So, although we were annoyed at having our little slice of heaven invaded, none of us were particularly surprised or alarmed by the arrival of a man who was thoroughly engaged in animated discussion with unseen others, and who felt perfectly comfortable asking a number of the trees, shrubs and other plants for their opinions and comments. We all knew what to do. We winked and smiled at one another, turned up the volume on our Walkman cassette players, buried our heads in our books and newspapers, and ignored the guy. Live, and let live. Right?*

*Wrong. Having concluded the discussion with his invisible friends, and apparently satisfied that the local flora had contributed all it had to offer, the man did something REALLY weird. He walked up to a fellow I recognized from the bank, stood directly in front of him – no more than two feet away—and waved! However, when the banker failed to respond, the crazy guy didn’t go away as one would*

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expect.

No. He kept on waving. Then he started jumping up and down, swinging his arms, and making funny faces. He skipped, hopped and pranced, flapping his elbows, bobbing his head, sticking out his tongue, crossing his eyes, rolling his shoulders...and kept it up for what seemed like forever. I would have laughed out loud if I hadn't been scared that the nut case might notice and start jumping around in front of me. The banker kept his cool though; never even looked at the lunatic, just shifted his posture to turn himself slightly away, and kept right on reading his paper. The weirdo eventually ran out of steam and went away. However, a few days later he was back again, and the very same thing happened – this time it was one of the executives from my workplace that he chose. Whoo hoo! That was fun to watch. But just like the banker, the boss lady never acknowledged the crazy guy's presence; just kept on eating her lunch like nothing out of the ordinary was going on.

The guy kept coming back, time and time again; and each time, the scene played out exactly as it had before. I thought that maybe I ought to look for someplace else to eat lunch. Some of the other regulars had done that. Otherwise, I knew that sooner or later my turn would come. And sure enough, the day arrived when I looked up from my book and saw the crazy guy heading my way. How I would respond? To just sit there, pretending not to notice seemed to be just about as weird as the guy's antics. But what other options were there? I didn't want to say or do anything to encourage the loony, or worse, antagonize him.

He walked right up to me, leaned down, waved his fingers in front of my face, and then went into his routine. I sat there rigid as a statue with my eyes glued to my book, and I prayed with my whole heart, "Oh God, please, please, please make this man go away!" The response I got was a cosmic chuckle and the words, "Aw, come on, girl...Aren't you just the least bit curious about who this man is and what he wants?" I had to admit that I was. So, I raised my eyes and faced the man.

Wouldn't you know it? I'd looked up at just the precise moment when the guy had given up and was turning to leave. And, of course, having seen that he had my attention, he changed his mind about leaving and started a whole new round of hopping, prancing, twirling, flapping, waving and bobbing. As I watched, his movements became more complex and stylized. He leapt high and clicked his heels, slid into a Michael Jackson moonwalk, and segued just as smooth as you please into an outrageous Mick Jagger strut! Wow! I couldn't help myself. I burst into laughter and gave the man an enthusiastic round of applause!

The man stopped, peered at me, leaned down to eye level, and said, "You can see me?"

"Yes. I see you. You'd be hard to miss. "

"Can you see ghosts? Do you see any around here?"

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*"Nope. I've never seen a ghost."*

*"Whew! That's good. If you can see me, but not them, then it must mean that I'm not a ghost anymore. I can't always tell. I've been trying get people to see me all day." Uh oh...His bizarre behavior was beginning to make sense to me.*

*"Hey, wait a minute," he said. "Wait a minute. How do I know that you're not a ghost?"*

*"Look. I'm eating chow fun and drinking a latte – ghosts can't do that."*

*"Sure they can. Will you shake my hand? Ghosts can't shake hands, or anything like that." We shook hands. "My name is Robert."*

*"Hey Robert. Uh...Listen..." A cosmic chuckle brushed my consciousness. "Next time you need a reality check, you know where to find me. I'm here most days at lunch time." Me and my big mouth...what made me say that?*

*Robert took me up on my offer, and from time to time I would also run into him in other places throughout the city. Once, I saw him sitting at a bus stop, crying like a baby. I asked him what was wrong, and that's when I learned who his ghosts were. Robert had not that long ago been discharged from the army. He was haunted by his memory of all the deaths he had witnessed and caused during the war, and was wracked with guilt, sorrow and shame. When we finished talking, I was crying too. Another time, I happened into him at the arboretum in Golden Gate Park – laughing and talking with a flowery bush. I had a great time with him, wandering around the park, and being introduced to all of his leafy friends. He told me that he'd had a special relationship with plants all his life. "They're the most naturally Christ-like beings on earth." He said. "They feed, heal, comfort, protect and teach others, and they willingly give their lives so others can live."*

*I took him to church with me once, but I'd ended up having to leave him on his own for the first ten minutes or so of the social hour following the service. That was a mistake. Nobody talked to him. I found him all alone in that room full of people, clutching a pot of geraniums, and quaking with anxiety. "Can you see me?" he asked "Please take my hand." One of the ladies approached then, and told me that my friend was frightening people, and that I should take him home.*

*Robert and I have developed a wonderful friendship over the many years since our first encounter. He taught me how to garden, and transformed my back yard into a virtual paradise. He has listened to my problems, given me wise advice, celebrated my victories, and stood by me in times of need. Robert is still nuttier than a fruitcake. Our friendship hasn't changed that...but it most certainly has changed me.*

*(Cynthia Stateman)*



## **Day 5 – The Trusting Heart**

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.* – Matthew 5:8 (NRSV)

**Read Romans 8:22-28 (Good News)**

**Matthew 7:1-5 (NRSV)**

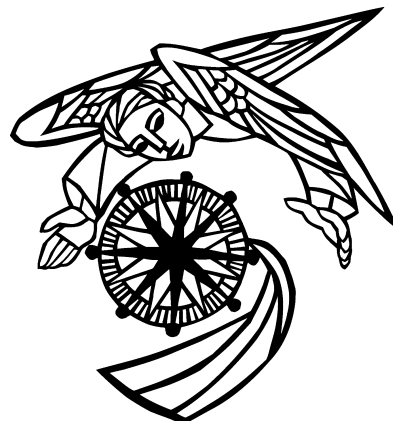
A day rarely goes by when we are not confronted with a large crowd of human need. Our daily newspapers and CNN remind us of crowds in Iraq where violence seems to reign on the streets, crowds in Sudan where violence has led to starvation, crowds in the Middle East that simply cannot find the path to peace; and we see first hand crowds in our communities struggling with poverty, anxiety, illness, abuse, loneliness, unemployment, depression, addiction, indifference and despair. We are inundated by cries of an entire creation, and are so interconnected with all of life we cannot help being affected by the pain of all that suffers.

A number of social scientists, psychologists and others have begun speaking about a phenomenon called compassion fatigue. It describes this feeling of being overwhelmed by unmet social needs. This fatigue is expressed by those who lament, “If I see one more picture of a starving child...If I hear one more story about people living on the streets...If one more person tells me what I ought to do, I’m going to scream.

I can’t fix the world. I can’t even fix my own life.” The solution is not avoidance. Refusal to read the papers or listen to the news is no protection. We need to experience it; it is a part of reality. As soon as we put down the newspaper, switch to another channel, and retreat to the sanctuary of our comfort zones, there is Jesus staring at us and asking the same question he put to Philip:

“What are you going to do about this?” Like Phillip, we often respond by trying to help Jesus get a grip on reality. “Look, these are huge problems. I am just one of your average disciples, and some of these people scare me to death. I’m not strong enough to resist my cultural conditioning. I don’t have the knowledge, skill or resources to make any real difference, just a lot of insecurity. What do you expect me to be able to do?”

Jesus does not ask or expect us to bear the sufferings of the world by ourselves, and none of us is individually called to do everything, heal everything, or change everything. We are asked to trust— in the power of God’s grace and love; in the teachings and example of Jesus Christ; and in the promptings and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are to articulate our painful longings and let them pass through us to God. Without the support of prayer, our compassion runs the danger of becoming self justifying good works, inner resources atrophy, and wells of living water turned stale. Our task in praying is giving speech to





## **Day 6 - The Sacred Heart**

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. — Matthew 5:7 (NRSV)*

**Read Matthew 5:9-11 (NRSV)**

**Matthew 5:43-48 (NRSV)**

**Luke 6:27-36 (NRSV)**

Jesus issues four ringing commands: love your enemies; pray for those who mistreat you; do good to those who seek to defeat you; bless those who say evil things about you. These instructions can be dismissed as utopian, or worse, be interpreted as a call to be acquiescent to evil and violence. Love of enemies is not a substitute for the quest for a world of justice and peace, but its driving force. What Jesus is calling for, is our cultivation of compassion with sacred hearts. The primary concern of the sacred heart is the creation, restoration and sustenance of relationships that recognize and respond to the brokenness and woundedness of our lives in ways that reveal and honor the sacredness of every life. The instruction is repeated, love your enemy and do good. Why? The directive is rooted in the very nature of God, “who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” and who is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” Whereas Matthew follows this exhortation with the statement, “Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect,” Luke

writes: “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful,” and then will you be sons and daughters of God. Love of enemies, like peacemaking, is one of the defining characteristics of God’s family, and the ultimate expression of compassion with the sacred heart of Jesus.

Our enemies are those persons and groups whom we believe have acted to damage, diminish or destroy our sense of safety and wellbeing. Our enemies also include those groups and individuals who believe we have acted that way towards them. Our culture teaches and reinforces the notion that the only option for being in relationship with an enemy is to be competitive and adversarial. The enemy must be defeated. Jesus, however, rejects a culture of violence characterized by a tit-for-tat mentality, and proposes a different strategy for breaking the cycle of evil. The following account is about how one family discovered the liberating power of compassion with sacred hearts, and found loving their enemy the key to their own healing.

*The phone call came just after dinner. It was my cousin Philip. He said, “We need you to come home. Daddy has been killed.”*

*I had just been to Kingston the previous summer for the fabulous celebration my hometown had put on to honor Uncle John on his 75th birthday. He had been Kingston’s first black physician, and had served that town for 50 years. How could Uncle John have been killed?*

*When I was a little girl, I liked to ride with him on Saturday mornings as he made his rounds in his big red Edsel station wagon. We would start off with visits to his patients in town, and then head*

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out on dusty tobacco roads to the shacks and trailers where the share-croppers and mill workers lived. Folks would pay him what ever they could – money if they had it, a handful of eggs, firewood, a handshake, a prayer. Who would kill my Uncle John?

He built a clinic on Reed Street. It was the very first, and for many years it had been the only clinic or hospital where Black folks could go without having to wait until last to be seen by a doctor. Why would anyone kill my Uncle John?

Phillip said, “Some punk kid, poor white trash, broke into the clinic with a gun in his pocket, looking for something to steal. Uncle John caught him by surprise, and was shoved hard against the wall. He fell to the floor, gasping for breath. Yeah, the kid dialed 911, and then he tried to run for it. But it was too late – Uncle John was dead and the cops were at the door.”

My cousins were arguing with one another when I arrived. Shock, fatigue, heartbreak, anger and grief. Visitors had been stopping by to let them know that the whole town was outraged by the crime. My cousins had been assured by one and all that the DA would do as he had promised – “send that good for nothing poor white cracker punk kid straight to death row.”

But the public defender had come by too. He confirmed that the DA was planning to charge the kid with a capital offense, and said that the kid had made up his mind to plead guilty. He said, “The charge doesn’t fit the crime. That boy committed a crime for sure, and it is a terrible tragedy, but it would be a real stretch of the law to call it a capital offense.” He had a question and a favor to ask. Did our family want justice or did we want vengeance? Shock, fatigue, heartbreak, anger and grief. Would the family be willing, he asked, to speak to the DA on behalf of justice? Would we be willing to ask the DA to file charges that were truly commensurate with the crime? My cousin Donny threw him out the house.

Donny shouted, “What a lot of nerve!” Rhonda asked, “What do you think Daddy would have wanted?” Philip asked “But, would it hurt to talk to the DA?.” Donny bellowed, “Over my dead body!” Frank said, “It’s not fair. It’s not our job to tell the DA what to do.” Ellen insisted, “I think the public defender is right, and you know it too!” “I don’t care,” Donny cried, “A punk like that is going to end up on death row sooner or later anyway. Our father is dead because of him. Don’t talk to me about justice. Where was the justice in Daddy dying like that?” Rhonda said, “I don’t know. All I know is how awful all of this is. I don’t know what the right thing to do is.” I asked, “Has anybody considered the possibility of talking to the kid?”

We piled into the van and headed for the jailhouse. Donny stayed behind. We bullied, badgered, threatened, and made a whole lot of noise before the attorneys would agree to set up the visit. It was awkward at first. The punk sat on one side of the table, staring down at his hands. We sat on the other side taking in every detail: blue eyes, thin lips, pointed nose, dimpled chin, brown hair, crooked teeth,

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high forehead, ragged fingernails bitten down to the quick.

Rhonda broke the silence. "You know, the DA is calling for your life. And your lawyer said you're going to plead guilty." He nodded.

"I need to know what happened. We need to know why. We need to understand this thing." He was silent. "Tell me!" Rhonda shouted. He raised his eyes, "I'm sorry about your father."

"It's too late for sorry." Rhonda said. "How old are you?"

His name was David. He had just turned 19. He'd grown up in the trailer park known as "the Bottoms," down by the river, just outside of town. Squalid. Ignorant. Dangerous. Crackerville. We asked questions, and he talked for more than an hour. He told us what happened. He said he owed a guy some money; money he didn't have; money he had no legitimate way of getting; money the guy was willing to kill him for. "Look. I'm sorry about your daddy. I really am. He was a good man. I remember him coming down to the Bottoms a long time ago, knocking on doors, letting everybody know that us kids could come to the clinic and get shots and such. My mama took all of us. Said there wasn't too many people around like him that cared anything about Bottom folks."

He said that he wasn't scared of prison. No, he hadn't been "inside" before; had never been caught. "I been in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing, for the wrong reason plenty of times." He said that prison didn't seem like it would be too bad; he'd lived a lot worse. He said his daddy was inside, and so was an uncle and one of his brothers; maybe they'd hook up. Death row? "I ain't never expected to live to no ripe old age anyway." He had quit school in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. He said that if he had it to do all over again, he would join the military. He had tried to enlist, but had failed the test. He said, "you got to have your reading up to be in the Army nowadays."

We sat in the van and talked. "Jeez, what a loser." "Uh huh." He's only 19. "Face it; David doesn't have a snowball's chance in Hell of turning his life around." "He's illiterate." "Yep." "Pathetic." "Uh huh." "I hate to say this, but prison just may be a step up for him." "He could learn to read in there." "Right, Rhonda... What are you doing?" "I'm making a list of books... What if we suggested that he had to learn to read, and finish a long list of books, and had to get his GED as conditions for parole? And what if, as a condition for probation, he had to learn a trade, and keep a job, and do some serious community service work for 5 or 10 years after he was released?" "Well, he is only 19." "Add the Autobiography of Malcolm X to your list." "If David could make good somehow, then maybe Daddy's death would have some meaning." "This is crazy." "Yep." "Do we talk to the DA?" "Uh huh." "Yep." "Sure. Why not?" The DA was incredulous. But we stood our ground and made our case. He agreed to reduce the charges against David and to submit our recommendations to the court.

Donny was so angry at us all that he had threatened to boycott the memorial service. His wife had only been able to talk him into

## *Compassion with the Heart of Christ*

coming at the very last minute. To make matters even worse for Donny, the court had, with the family's consent, granted David's request to attend the service. It had been agreed that David and his mother would join us in the opening procession, and would sit with us during the service.

There were hundreds of people in attendance. The aisles were filled, and every seat was taken. One after another, Uncle John's family and friends stood and came forward, to tell a story, to share a song, to recite a poem, to remember him, to speak of loss and to say goodbye. When David stood, I was confused at first, and I had thought that perhaps he was preparing to leave. But no, he turned to the congregation and began to speak. "A good man is dead because of what I did. I'm sorry." He gestured towards me and my cousins. "They spared my life. I didn't deserve that. I'm going to be in prison for a very long time, but I'm not being sent there to die. What I want to ask all of you here is... is there any way you can forgive me?"

The pastor reached out to David and asked him to kneel. He called for a laying on of hands, placed his right hand on David's head, and began to pray. The pastor prayed for forgiveness. Ellen was the first to rise and place her hands upon David's back. The pastor prayed for mercy. Phillip and Rhonda rose and joined them. The pastor prayed for reconciliation. Donny stood and added his hands. He prayed for young people like David whose lives we've given up on. The rest of the family rose together, and we added our hands. Before too long, the entire gathering had come forward; laying hands on one another until we were all connected as one. The pastor prayed, and we prayed with him. We prayed for David to be healed, and we prayed for ourselves to be healed; and when it was done, we sang *Amazing Grace*.

Cynthia Stateman, *Soul Force*, "The Wolf," *Pace e Bene Nonviolence Service Newsletter*, Winter 2000, Vol. 11, No. 1

Jesus did not proclaim ethereal ideals, but lived what he proclaimed. He ate with and reached out to Pharisees and others who opposed him, and gave of himself to those who needed healing or forgiveness. At the moment of his arrest, Jesus healed the wounded servant of the high priest, while calling for an end to any violent resistance (Luke 22:50); and the dying Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Jesus is not demanding of us a perfection we cannot attain. What frees and empowers us is not a willing of behavior, but responding to God's grace. As we become aware of our projections on our enemies, we are able to develop an objective rage at the injustices that have been perpetrated while still seeing them as children of God. At no point is the inrush and outflow of divine grace so immediately and concretely perceptible as in those moments when we let go of our animosity towards another and relax into God's love.

